

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin

May 21, 2002

Marketing Group to Offer 'Pro Bono' Services

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A legal marketing group in Chicago is asking its members to do what lawyers have been doing for years.

The Chicago chapter of the Legal Marketing Association will offer pro bono services to legal-aid organizations in the city. Members of the LMA will help the groups develop long-term business plans and marketing strategies.

While gaining access to justice is their first priority, most legal-aid organizations put marketing and development on the back burner.

They often survive on a bare-bones budget, a staff of volunteers and generous donations - all for the sake of helping disadvantaged and low-income people obtain legal services. Many legal-aid organizations have a strong mission but lack a long-term plan, said Pat Stankard, client services manager at Gardner, Carton & Douglas and former treasurer of the LMA.

"These are issues that we wrestle with in practice groups of law firms," she said. "What is your plan? If [the legal-aid organizations] have a direction and a plan and goals, you have something you can work towards."

But most legal-aid organizations can't afford and don't have the resources to develop marketing.

"[The project] represents an opportunity for marketing professionals within the law firms to do some of the same [pro bono work] we ask our lawyers to do," said Michael R. Ralston, president of the LMA and director of marketing for Vedder, Price. "It was that recognition that led us to ... undertake this."

Although it's common for lawyers to offer pro bono services to clients in need, Stankard said, legal marketing professionals historically haven't done so.

"We thought it was a great opportunity for legal marketers to give something back to the legal community," she said.

Stankard said the marketing professionals will offer advice such as developing marketing brochures, volunteer recognition and increased advertising.

The Chicago Bar Foundation, which supports about 40 legal-aid organizations, will hold a seminar/reception with LMA members to discuss the project at 5 p.m. Thursday at the law office of Sidley, Austin, Brown & Wood.

To start, the Foundation hopes to match LMA members with at least 10 of its organizations.

Legal aid organizations are in great need of increased awareness, says Leslie A. Corbett, executive director of Coordinated Advice and Referral Program for Legal Services. She said the groups provide little information to the general public and the legislature, which need the education the most.

"[The public and legislature] don't see legal services as a social service," Corbett said. "They see it as a lawyer's job."

But the legal-aid groups don't know how to spread the word about the positive benefits of their work.

"Bottom line -- we just don't know how to do that," Corbett said. "I think legal-aid organizations and small nonprofits don't even think about [public relations] and marketing because all of their resources go into the services they provide."

Julia C. Langfelder began her job as the development coordinator for the Center for Conflict Resolution about a year ago. Her position is the first in CCR's history and was developed to expand the group's reach through special events, marketing and public relations.

"It's very new to the organization and it's interesting coming in from a [business] marketing background," she said. "I think in nonprofits in general there's a lack of [marketing]."

One reason, she said, is due to a limited budget.

"It's very difficult but you get very creative," she said. "You start looking into new ways of [planning events]."

In her experience, legal aid organizations are in need of long-term plans, guidance and structure, she said.

"Marketing is a process and lot of people don't realize that," Langfelder said. "A lot of people have a misconception that this can happen overnight."

"[The pro bono project] is a great asset for all of us," she said. "This is really going to push us forward."